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FM SECSTATE WASHDC
TO RUEHSB/AMEMBASSY HARARE 2760
INFO SOUTHERN AF DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY COLLECTIVE
RUEHBS/AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS 1058
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RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2520
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 2973
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 STATE 077761

SIPDIS
GENEVA FOR RMA
BRUSSELS/LONDON/PARIS FOR AFRICA-WATCHERS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/17/2018
TAGS: PREF PHUM ZI
SUBJECT: UN HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE IN ZIMBABWE --
DISCUSSION WITH U/SYG-ERC HOLMES

REF: A. (A) HARARE 615
1B. (B) STATE 74571
1C. (C) HARARE 593

Classified By: PRM/AFR DIRECTOR MCKELVEY FOR REASON 1.4(D)

Summary

11. (C) On the margins of the OCHA Donor Support group High-Level Meeting in New York July 14, State PRM/MCE Office Director Margaret Pollack and USAID/DCHA/OFDA Director Ky Luu discussed USG concerns about the performance of the OCHA office and Humanitarian Coordinator in Harare with Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs/Emergency Relief Coordinator Sir John Holmes. Holmes understood the concerns but stressed the delicate balancing act that the UN must take in Zimbabwe. He confided that the current Humanitarian Coordinator Zacarias will be leaving shortly; no replacement has been named. During the Donor Support Group meeting, Holmes requested that donors all press the GOZ on the need for NGOs to restart robust humanitarian programming. In response to a suggestion that a high level OCHA visit was in order, Holmes noted that as a UK national, he was not well placed to make an effective visit; the Deputy ERC Catherine Bragg (Canadian) might be. End summary.

Concerns about UN Performance Discussed with Holmes

12. (U) On the margins of the OCHA (UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) Donor Support group High-Level Meeting in New York July 14, State PRM/MCE Office Director Margaret Pollack and USAID/DCHA/OFDA Director Ky Luu discussed USG concerns with UN Undersecretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator John Holmes regarding OCHA's role in Zimbabwe. Specifically, Pollack and Luu raised the following issues:

13. (C) Concern that the UN Humanitarian Coordinator had not taken a stronger position with the Government of Zimbabwe to defend humanitarian principles, to facilitate the operations of the humanitarian community, and to protect at-risk Zimbabweans: Holmes responded that his team -- and the HC in particular -- had been pressing GOZ officials "quite a bit" on all this, albeit in a quiet, non-public way. He acknowledged that perhaps he and his staff could do a better job of keeping interested governments apprised of OCHA's diplomatic efforts.

¶4. (C) Concern over the apparent voluntary withdrawal by OCHA of two planned protection staff at a time when they were crucially needed: Holmes said this was the first he had heard of this and agreed that if the explanation for this action was that OCHA did not want to provoke an incident with the GOZ, then OCHA should have forced the issue and placed the burden directly on the GOZ to request that the one staff member already in country be removed from the country. He said he would look into this.

¶5. (C) Concern over the participation by GOZ officials in UN assessments about the viability and safety of IDP returns: Holmes did not specifically comment on this point, but took our concerns under advisement.

¶6. (C) The need to ensure that the HC and OCHA's field operations are strengthened with the right personnel and sufficient resources in place to adequately and robustly engage the GOZ on humanitarian operations: Holmes clearly heard the message that a new HC, with the requisite humanitarian operations/diplomatic skill mix, was very much needed. He said that the current HC -- UN Resident Coordinator Antonio Zacarias -- has asked to leave. The position is currently being advertised, Holmes said, and commented that he thought it would be difficult to recruit candidates ("Who wants to work in Zimbabwe these days?").

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Holmes noted that problems with the HC have existed for a while now and that the HC and OCHA staff in Zimbabwe "do not get along." (Note: When asked more formally during the ODSG High-Level meeting what recourse the ERC had to deal with non-performing HCs, Holmes sidestepped the question, commenting that he now has "compacts" with eight of the 26 HCs, which help the HCs identify and focus on priorities and provide a documented basis for mutual accountability.)

OCHA Donors' Support Group High-Level Meeting

¶7. (C) Zimbabwe was also an agenda item (along with Burma) on the ODSG High-Level meeting. The "basic problem," said Holmes is that Zimbabwe is a "prolonged crisis" and that he did not see any end in sight. (Comment: in an aside during a meeting break, Holmes told Pollack that Zimbabwe opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai was not a very good politician -- implying that a Tsvangirai-led government was not necessarily the solution.) Holmes noted that the already bad food situation is only getting worse, along with a continuing deterioration of Zimbabwe's infrastructure (e.g., health) compounded by the worsening food situation. He said 2-4 million Zimbabweans are in need of outside assistance.

¶8. (C) Holmes said that OCHA is not viewed affectionately by the GOZ and that it was important, therefore, to keep a low profile, noting that the UN team in Zimbabwe has protested publicly and privately the restrictions placed by the government on NGO operations. On the NGO issue, Holmes said that NGOs could continue some small operations, but that in practice the NGOs found it very difficult to really operate; he speculated that while the restrictions still exist, that perhaps it was just a matter of time before the GOZ would ease the restrictions. He said that humanitarian operations "will be okay for a few more weeks," but that it would become a real problem if the restrictions went on longer than that. The UN can only fill small gaps in NGO operations and he encouraged donors, noting that the UN has pressed at all levels, to similarly press the GOZ on this issue. He ended his remarks by saying that working in Zimbabwe was "a very delicate balancing act."

¶9. (C) The ensuing discussion was equally cautionary. The UK representative expressed concern that parts of the UN were not ready for a deteriorating situation and that more

realistic contingency planning was needed. Ireland echoed this concern, asking specifically what was being done by OCHA on possibly large refugee outflows. On this point, Holmes was very clear that UNHCR had the lead and that UNHCR had a good contingency plan in place and was working very closely with OCHA and governments in the region. (Pollack re-emphasized this point with the Irish rep during a break.) Canada urged Holmes or Deputy ERC Catherine Bragg to visit Zimbabwe and expressed concerns about the HC that were similar to ours. In response to another USG point regarding the critical communication leadership role OCHA needed to play with the humanitarian community in Zimbabwe, Holmes acknowledged that more needed to be done, noting that Zimbabwe was one of OCHA's "principles of partnership" pilot countries. In response to Canada's point on a high-level OCHA visit, Holmes said that he was the wrong nationality (British) -- and noted that when such a suggestion was made publicly by British officials, it was immediately dismissed by the GOZ. Holmes did suggest that perhaps Deputy ERC Bragg (a Canadian national) could visit, but acknowledged that the GOZ will not accept a UN Special Envoy position.

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